As I write, Easter—the annual Christian commemoration of the passion of Jesus Christ—is fast approaching. Here in Tucson, Arizona, as in so many other locations heavily influenced by Christianity, elaborate, highly performative events commemorate this holy day. Two such long-running but, in many ways, disparate events have been the Yaqui Easter rituals and the passion play *Simon Peter*. The elaborate rituals of the Southern Arizona Indians are descended from a passion play taught to them by Jesuit missionaries in the early 1600s, combining stories of the Passion with indigenous cultural traditions. *Simon Peter*, created by Tucsonan Katherine Genders in 1979, tells the story of the Passion from the perspective of the apostle Simon and regularly filled the music hall of the 2,200-seat Tucson Convention Center until this year, when conflicts over copyrights upon the author’s death ended the production. Although quite different visually, structurally, and in the makeup of the participants, both rely primarily on music to communicate their narratives of the last days of Christ.

This is no surprise, since music and spirituality historically often have been integrated; music’s ability to convey more than mere words has placed it at the forefront of attempts to communicate with an “absent Other,” to help humans move toward larger feelings, emotions, and meanings. A 2004 article in *U.S. News and World Report* proclaimed in its headline, “Forget politics. It’s about the music” (Tolson). “It” refers to organized religion; the author argues that at least in the United States, what draws churchgoers to church is not politics, not service programs, but the cultural activities—primarily music. Books like Mark Chaves’s *Congregations in America* and David Stowe’s *How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans* confirm this. Stowe goes so far as to argue that “[y]ou can’t understand America without understanding religion [. . .] and you can’t understand American religion without understanding its music” (qtd. in Tolson par. 6).

One could argue that understanding the history of theatre requires an understanding of music as well. More often than not, music has played a vital role in theatrical traditions.
of both Western and non-Western cultures, an argument well-supported by the articles in this issue. Indeed, music theatre is as old as theatre itself and has in actuality been the dominant mode of theatrical expression throughout history. According to Aristotle,

Greek tragedy grew out of the dithyramb, a chorus of men who sang hymns in honor of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility. Although improvisation later led to spoken dialogue, music remained a crucial aspect of ancient Greek theatre. The religious drama of the Middle Ages grew out of passages sung by priests in the churches, such as the Easter Quem Queritis trope, a liturgical drama that communicated—you guessed it!—a story from the Passion. And music was prominent as well in most medieval productions that occurred outside of the church, contributing to the importance of music to Renaissance dramatists who followed, including Shakespeare. Of Shakespeare’s (possibly) thirty-eight plays, twenty-five include singing. A trumpet flourish signaled important moments in performances of the English Renaissance, from the beginning of the play to entrances of kings. That most adult actors were required to sing attests to the importance of music in the theatre of this period.

The Renaissance signaled the beginnings of opera, and from there numerous popular entertainments developed that relied on music to entertain, forms such as burlesque, ballad opera, melodrama, minstrelsy, vaudeville, and of course the modern musical. Classical non-western performance forms rely on music as heavily; in fact, non-Western cultures in Africa and the Near East likely developed forms of music theatre that pre-date the dithyrambs of the Greeks. Music is at the heart of Sanskrit performance, Beijing Opera, Noh, Bunraku, and Kabuki. The prominence of the language of drumming in much indigenous African performances suggests the importance of music to them; such forms as the township musical of South Africa stand as examples of vital traditions of hybridity. All of these are in some way connected to religion or, more generally, spirituality, as are many of the Western traditions mentioned. For most of these periods/cultures, the religious establishment played a significant role in theatrical production.

This is no longer true, particularly in the West. Although theatre today is sometimes used as a tool by religious groups to carry their message, as in Simon Peter, religion is used less often to carry the message of a particular playwright, director, or producer, particularly in the commercial theatre of the United States. Of course, this is very likely due to our increasingly pluralistic society; the artist can’t assume a homogenous Catholic, Buddhist, or Muslim audience. And there are exceptions, such as Doubt or Faith Healer on Broadway, or Jewtopia and Confessions of a Mormon Boy off-Broadway. But these are non-musical plays; what to make of the seeming proliferation of shows on and off-Broadway that communicate religious themes through both theatre and music?

Religion as a theme—particularly a tangential one—is not new in the musical, although it usually was not treated very prominently until the advent of the more “serious” shows. Cole Porter’s character Reno Sweeney, a former evangelist, in Anything Goes is a good example of how religious themes and characters were largely parodied or burlesqued in musicals before the Golden Age. Such parodies continued to appear in the musical (Nunsense, anyone?) but have been somewhat balanced by a few more serious treatments of religious figures, such as the Black South African preacher Stephen Kumalo in Maxwell Anderson and Kurt Weill’s musical adaptation of Cry, the Beloved
Country, Lost in the Stars, or the nuns in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s The Sound of Music. But the most common connections between religion and musicals have been in shows highlighting Jewish or African-American culture. The increased appearance of Jewish-themed musicals in the 1960s—no surprise given the religious/cultural affiliation of many creators of musicals—culminated in the popular, long-running Fiddler on the Roof. Many black musicals of the 1970s highlighted religious themes, particularly through the use of gospel music: Tambourines to Glory, Trumpets of the Lord, Purlie, and Arms too Short to Box with God. More recently shows like Parade and Bring in ‘Da Noise, Bring in ‘Da Funk show similar influences. The 1970s also saw a spate of religious-themed musicals that, interestingly, drew on pop or rock music to communicate these themes, shows like Jesus Christ Superstar, Godspell, and Pippin (see my interview with one of the creators of the latter two, Stephen Schwartz, in this issue).

But since the 1970s religious or spiritual-themed shows have been fewer and farther between, save for the occasional prayer issued to a higher power (Jean Valjean in Les Miserables: “God on high, hear my prayer”)—until now. The past couple of years have brought to Broadway or off-Broadway stages such musicals as Urinetown; a revival of Fiddler, Caroline, or Change; Sidd; Spamalot; and Altar Boyz. Urinetown, while not necessarily spiritual in its themes, contains a number, “Run, Freedom, Run,” that is highly gospel-infused. The fourth revival of Fiddler continues its nostalgic narrative deeply entrenched in Judaism, although my own viewing of this recently-closed show, with Harvey Fierstein as Tevye, had me wondering if the creators truly meant to replace kosher with [k]amp. Tony Kushner’s Caroline, or Change, with music by Jeanine Tesori, explores the vexed relationships among Jews and blacks in the early 1960s American south, complete with Chanukah party. Sidd’s treatment of Eastern spirituality is highly unusual on the Broadway stage; an adaptation of Herman Hesse’s Siddharth, the exploration of an Indian man’s search for enlightenment ran a brief thirteen performances.

Spamalot, eschewing the more serious religious themes of Fiddler, Caroline, and Sidd, returns to parody with its somewhat revisionist telling of the legendary Arthurian search for the Holy Grail, the cup from which Jesus supposedly drank at the “Last Supper” the night before his death. And in a similar vein, Altar Boyz parodies both boy bands and Christian rock with its loose story of the rise to prominence of an incongruous quintet, Matthew, Mark, Luke, Juan, and Abraham, who thanks his fellow band members for “their willingness to drive that extra mile so that I could keep Kosher”—and is there any more appropriate love song lyric in recent musical theatre history than “Girl, you make me wanna wait”? (See the Fall 2005 issue of this journal for reviews of both Spamalot and Altar Boyz).

What to make of the increased appearance of spiritual- and religious-themed musicals? Not much, I would have to argue. One could point to a post-9/11 yearning for security through spirituality and higher meaning (evident in the return of the televangelist, who not so long ago was nearly shamed out of existence by the likes of Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart but ostensibly has been redeemed by Joel Osteen). At the very least, these shows, including Fiddler’s revival, likely are part of the nostalgic nature of much of the commercial theatre these days, which could be attributed to post-9/11 society in America. But the most successful of the shows mentioned parody religion, belying a
yearning for spirituality and higher meaning and suggesting a kind of neo-Neitzschian musical theatre. Even more cynically, *Caroline, or Change* and *Sidd* (neither of which were financially successful) aside, the musicals merely could be symptomatic of that ages-old exploitation of religion for commercial purposes. As producer Charles Vance pointed out about the Bible as source material, “It’s a damn good book and there’s no royalties” (qtd. in Steyn 122). This could be said about the Koran, the Mahabharata, and many other holy books as well. To quell such cynicism, one must look to non-commercial ritual and performance—such as the Yaqui Easter rituals, passion plays like *Simon Peter*, the *Ta’ziyeh* of Iran, and other traditions such as are explored in several articles in this issue—to find the most meaningful conflagrations of music, spirituality, and theatre.

**Works Consulted**
